



Retrospection

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3 min read

It was evening in the bad-lands, and the red sun had slipped behind the far-off hills. The sundown breeze bent the grasses in the coulees and curled tiny dust-clouds on the barren knolls. Down in a gulch a clear, cool creek dallied its way toward the Missouri, where its water, bitter as gall, would be lost in the great stream. Here, where Nature forbids man to work his will, and where the she wolf dens and kills to feed her litter, an aged Indian stood near the scattered bones of two great buffalo-bulls. Time had bleached the skulls and whitened the old warrior's hair, but in the solitude he spoke to the bones as to a boyhood friend:

“Ho! Buffalo, the years are long since you died, and your tribe, like mine, was even then shrinking fast, but you did not know it; would not believe it; though the signs did not lie. My father and his father knew your people, and when one night you went away, we thought you did but hide and would soon come back. The snows have come and gone many times since then, and still your people stay away. The young-men say that the great herds have gone to the Sand Hills, and that my father still has meat. They have told me that the white man, in his greed, has killed—and not for meat—all the Buffalo that our people knew. They have said that the great herds that made the ground tremble as they ran were slain in a few short years by those who needed not. Can this be true, when ever since there was a world, our people killed your kind, and still left herds that grew in numbers until they often blocked the rivers when they passed? Our people killed your kind that they themselves might live, but never did they go to war against you. Tell me, do your people hide, or are the young-men speaking truth, and have your people gone with mine to Sand Hill shadows to come back no more?”

“Ho! red man—my people all have gone. The young-men tell the truth and all my tribe have gone to feed among

the shadow-hills, and your father still has meat. My people suffer from his arrows and his lance, yet there the herds increase as they did here, until the white man came and made his war upon us without cause or need. I was one of the last to die, and with my brother here fled to this forbidding country that I might hide; but one day when the snow was on the world, a white murderer followed on our trail, and with his noisy weapon sent our spirits to join the great shadow-herds. Meat? No, he took no meat, but from our quivering flesh he tore away the robes that Napa gave to make us warm, and left us for the Wolves. That night they came, and quarrelling, fighting, snapping 'mong themselves, left but our bones to greet the morning sun. These bones the Coyotes and the weaker ones did drag and scrape, and scrape again, until the last of flesh or muscle disappeared. Then the winds came and sang—and all was done.”

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